

The Seven Vanished Men

BY ARTHUR SOMERS ROCHE

The Gray Ghost--Criminal Technician--As a Kidnap Extraordinary



"If you will find out what ails Tom Horton," Bleakie told Peham, "you may write your own check."

At the clubhouse of the Wolves, that gay association of actors, managers and others connected with the theater, Peham signed his luncheon check and started from the dining room. Maline, the famous producer, waved a hand to the immaculate Peham. "Any time that the Gray Ghost dies, or you give up your battle with him," laughed the manager, "you can have a job with me, Mr. Peham."

Peham flushed. His warfare with the Gray Ghost was a matter of common knowledge. Nevertheless, he was sensitive on the subject. The criminal had had the better of their encounter thus far. But he shrugged and laughed.

"You look as gloomy as though you had a private Gray Ghost walking your own ancestral chambers, Maline," he said.

"Some people have got it pretty soft," declared the manager. "I'd trade jobs in a minute. If the Gray Ghost robs a bank it doesn't cost you a penny if you can't find him. But if I can't find an actor, where the deuce am I?"

Peham looked down at the fat, red face of Maline. Usually that face was wrinkled with mirth; the small brown eyes twinkled. But today the face was lugubrious. Peham glanced about the crowded dining room.

"I see a lot of pretty good actors here," he declared.

"Not the ones I want," frowned Maline.

"Sorry, but I can't waste sympathy on you," said Peham. "With five plays packing New York theaters and a dozen successes on the road, you strike me as being one of the filthy rich. Why do you want actors, anyway? Aren't the ones you have satisfactory? I've seen all your current productions, and they seem well cast to me."

Maline stared at him almost angrily.

"Which interested you most? What the Gray Ghost did last year or what he is going to do tomorrow? Well, it is the same way with me. The plays that I've produced don't interest me. It's the play that I'm going to produce that counts. And here I've got the greatest manuscript I ever read and no one to play it. The 'Three Wise Men' is the name of it—a mystical melodrama. And I can't find three character actors to fill the bill."

DEWEES, who was also a producer of note, had stopped at the table and listened to Maline's plaint.

"I'm in the same boat," he said. "I have a play the office which has the slickest parts. Big parts. And I can't find anyone to play them."

TRYON here tells me that he doesn't know whether you'll take the case or not," he stated deliberately at Peham. "What the blues are you, anyway? A prima donna?"

Peham chuckled. He liked this vigorous, irascible old man. "Jerry humors me so that I do act a little bit uppity," he admitted.

"Well, don't act that way with me," cried Bleakie. Suddenly he beamed upon Peham, thereby extracting from his words all possible offense.

"Young man, if you'll find out what ails Tom Horton, you may write your own check."

"These are sweetly sympathetic words," said Peham. "I have always a chair by the fire, and a seat at my table, for gentlemen whose conversation is so interesting."

TRYON realized that his partner had acquired a liking for each other. Jerry loved Peham, and the surest way to Jerry's heart was to indicate that he liked Peham. Bleakie saw the beaming face of Jerry and frowned.

"Quit grinning like a cat, that's a stolen cream," he cried. "Let's see this wonderful partner of yours produce the goods."

"Suppose you describe the goods, Mr. Bleakie," suggested Peham.

"My partner, Tom Horton, is acting like a madman, and I want to know why."

"What he's doing?" asked Peham.

"Making a fool of himself," snapped Bleakie.

"There are so many ways in which that may be done," smiled Peham.

"Meaning that you want me to get to the point, eh?" demanded Bleakie.

"I would like to know what's wrong with Mr. Horton," said Peham gently.

"A man has a right to dispose of his property as he sees fit. Only you or Mr. Horton's family could apply to the courts in what case as this."

"I don't want to apply to the courts, and Tom hasn't any family," said Bleakie.

"Then I'm afraid that there's nothing to be done," asserted Peham.

He frowned. "Still, because it's an interesting affair—let me think it over, Mr. Bleakie."

BUT next afternoon he telephoned the banker. "I've seen your partner."

"I happen to know several dealers, and I got one of them to take me to Mr. Horton's house this morning. I happen to know something about jade and I was able to interest Mr. Horton. I asked him why he was disposing so recklessly of properties that had been expensively and painstakingly acquired. He looked at me quizzically and replied: 'Young man, a time comes to every one when he makes the discovery that a human being is free or is a slave. I've worried forty years about my possessions. I've been afraid of burglars, of fires, of loss. I'm ridding myself of this obsession, and if it costs me \$200,000 to be a free man, it's cheap at the price. I suppose you think I'm foolish, crazy. Maybe I am; but, if so, there are others just as crazy. Bill Smathers is doing the same thing. So is John Wilkie. In fact, seven of us, the biggest private collectors in New York, have decided that we'll free ourselves from the dreadful burden of ownership, no matter at what cost.'"

"He's insane," cried Bleakie.

"Maybe," said Peham dubiously. "But I never met a saner-seeming man. You know, there's a lot to be said on his side of the argument."

"You're a young jackass," cried Bleakie.

"Thank you," said Peham.

"Keep the change," cried the banker. "How about some golf?"

Peham laughed. "Any time at all."

"I'll ring you up," said Bleakie. "But I won't bring any blank check with me."

And that, Peham thought, was the end of the Horton case. A matter of four days had been observed to carry in their hands as they left their rooms the letters which had just arrived. The letters had probably contained instructions that they should be brought to the police station, or else the address to which these actors went was unfamiliar to them.

Perhaps the writer of these letters had wished no evidence of the destination of the letters' recipients to be left in their homes. Peham found a thrill of excitement as this theory presented itself to him.

seemed to have disappeared, along with five other character actors—Minister, Blanford, Kelley, Shedden and Garceau. They were all more or less friendly, all about the same age and all actors. And it looks funny to us. Last night one of the committees of the Wolves had its monthly meeting. It's a committee that has broad powers. Talking over those two deaths and the continued disappearance of the five other men, we decided—well, we didn't decide anything except to ask you to look into the matter. It's hard for us to believe that even the direst poverty would drive seven to suicide. And it happens to be well known to all of us that Swinburn never rode on the elevated. He was in an accident on the elevated ten years ago and had ever since an obsession horror of those trains. Of course, this isn't evidence. Neither our belief that seven was normal real evidence. Nevertheless, here's a check for \$2,500 as a retainer. Will you take the case?"

Peham looked at the check and tore it up.

"I am a Wolf," he said, "and the case interests me. I don't want money. Now, tell me everything you know."

But beyond giving Peham the addresses of the two dead men and the five other missing actors Maline could add nothing to what he had already told. Seven, according to the police, was unquestionably a suicide. Swinburn had been accidentally killed.

PEHAM began his investigation by visiting the last known residence of Seven. He learned that on the evening of a month ago, a widow without children, had received a letter by messenger. He had left his modest rooms and never returned. He had taken with him no baggage. The same facts fitted the cases of all the other men. The uniformed messengers had brought their letters. They had gone out hurriedly and had never returned. In three cases their rooms had been rented to other people and their baggage stored in the cellar. The others happened to have paid in advance, and their rooms, or apartments, were ready for them. And it was not extraordinary that their landlords had not reported their disappearance to the police. Swinburn, for instance, might have obtained a sudden engagement with a road company or with a motion picture concern that necessitated instant travel.

One thing attracted Peham's attention. Of the seven missing men, four had been observed to carry in their hands as they left their rooms the letters which had just arrived. The letters had probably contained instructions that they should be brought to the police station, or else the address to which these actors went was unfamiliar to them.

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At the last address which he visited, the room of Minister, he found among the missing man's effects, to which he was given ready access on showing his card, a diary kept by the actor. The last item on the last page gave Peham his first clue:

"Just received letter from Jerry Theatrical Agency, Broadway, asking me to call," the diary read.

Peham looked shocked. "I didn't see it," he admitted.

"And you didn't read of Swinburn's accidental death the day before yesterday?" inquired the producer.

Peham shook his head.

"Seven was found in Central Park, a bullet hole in his forehead, powder marks around the wound and a revolver lying beside him. Swinburn slipped on the 6th avenue L platform at 42d street and was instantly killed by a train," said Maline. "There was nothing much in the papers about either of them. Just paragraphs on an inside page. But they were both Wolves, and a few of us over at the club got the idea that there is something queer about the two deaths. You know, neither of them has been in evidence at all recently. They

or, more of the five men might be in the process of being killed.

Why? The imagination failed to supply any motive whatsoever. All of these seven vanished men were poor. These men, though successful as artists, had had no financial success. Robbery could not be the motive.

Behind the most unreasoning occurrence lies a reason. If one actor had disappeared, the problem might be insurmountable, but where seven had vanished the problem should be easier. Parallel trails, amazing coincidences, should offer themselves to his observation. Only they didn't.

Robbery he discarded. Why, then, should any one interest himself in the disappearance of seven old actors? If not for what they had, could it be for what they were? He seemed to feel something at his mental finger tips, something elusive yet tangible. But it slipped from his clutches.

Never had the Gray Ghost proposed a puzzle so unsolvable as this. Indeed, it seemed like a feat of the Gray Ghost. It took organization to kidnap seven men, to kill two of them, and leave no traces of murder. Only the Gray Ghost would not waste his time with poverty-stricken actors.

PEHAM laughed at himself; wherever he turned he saw the mocking countenance of the Gray Ghost. And it was while he sneered at himself that slim Dickenson, a friend and man of work, ushered into his living room one of the elevator boys whom Peham had interviewed earlier in the day.

The boy, an undersized gamin of the streets, with a hard mouth and bold eyes, was in a fever of excitement.

"That guy Ferry—the agent! I seen him half an hour ago, Mr. Peham. In a taxi, shootin' across 42nd street. I got another taxi. I followed him until he stopped in front of a house on East 34th street. I got out of my car half a block down the street. I told my taxi man to keep an eye on the other machine, that was still standing in front of a house. I ducked into a drug store on the corner and telephoned my brother. I tell him not to care about expense. In five minutes he drives up in another taxi. I describes Ferry to him, gives him all me loose change, and tells him if Ferry come out to follow me to Chicago if he has to. Then I beats it down here to you."

Peham eyed the youngster. "How much are you paid as elevator boy?"

"Eighteen berries a week," replied the boy.

"And what's your name?" asked Peham.

"Daniel Boyd," answered the boy.

"Twice eighteen is thirty-six. You're working for me. That's your weekly salary to start," said Peham. Young Boyd grinned impudently at him. "I'll be getting seventy-two this time next month, if you know a good man when you see him," he said.

Peham smiled; then his eyes grew eager. "What's the address of the house that Ferry entered?" he asked.

The boy told him. Bewildered appeared in Peham's eyes. Then, bidding young Boyd follow, he raced downstairs, out of the building and into the taxi waiting for Boyd. He ordered the man to drive to the corner of 71st street and Madison avenue. There he alighted, but there was no trace of Boyd's brother or of the taxicab which had brought Ferry to this neighborhood. So Peham, bidding his new employee to wait there until his brother returned, and commanding him then to come at once to his apartment, returned there himself. One hour later Boyd and a small edit of himself came to Peham. The younger boy, whose name was George, burst into his story.

"The guy Dan told me to lay for came out about three minutes after Dan left. I followed him to No. — Madison avenue. From there I followed him to No. — East 34th street. Then he went to two houses on 5th avenue, one on Gramercy Park and another on Washington Square. He stayed a few minutes at this house and then came out. Last he drove to the corner of 16th street and 3rd avenue. He got out of his taxi, paid

the driver and walked to a house on Stuyvesant Square. He opened the front door with a latch key, so I figured that was where he lived and I was safe to leave him. I got another taxi and beat it up here. Me brother Dan is working for you. Am I?"

"You are," said Peham. "At the same salary. Now give me the numbers of those houses again."

The boy handed him a dirty piece of paper on which he had written the numbers. Peham nodded commendation and went to the telephone. He called up Mr. Robert Bleakie, and a moment later was talking to that gentleman: "Mr. Bleakie, John Wilkie lives on Gramercy Park, and William Smathers lives on Washington Square. Please tell me the names and addresses of four other friends of your partner who are also collectors of precious things."

"Tom Bartholomew lives at No. — Fifth avenue. Sam Harding lives two doors from him. Phil Riley lives at No. — East Thirty-ninth street, and Ben Thompson at No. — Madison avenue. What's the idea?"

Peham's laugh was excited. "I'm not sure, but your partner told me that Wilkie and Smathers were selling their collections. Can you tell me if the other four are doing the same thing?"

"They are," replied Bleakie. "And their business associates are as worried as I am. They refused to see their friends, just as Tom Horton refused to see me."

"Tell them to quit worrying," said Peham. And then he hung up.

VENICE contributes exquisitely over the telephone with Jerry Tryon, and ten minutes after that he was standing on a corner of Stuyvesant Square remote from the house that Ferry had entered. He had hardly left his taxi when Jerry, accompanied by half a dozen of his operatives, descended from a big limousine. Two other cars followed, and in all there were twenty men in the group which Peham led across the square.

A few doors from the house which was their objective, Peham paused.

"Jerry," he said, "I'm acting on the wildest sort of theory. Either there are seven multimillionaires imprisoned in that house, or there are not. In the latter case, we may have an unwilling visit to the police court. It is no light offense to batter down the doors of a respectable private house. And if I'm mistaken, the laugh that will go up—"

"We've been laughed at a lot already, Mr. Peham," replied Jerry grimly. "Let's go."

Behind their overcoats four of the operatives carried axes and crowbars. The door of the house which Ferry had entered gave way in thirty seconds. Peham had been tricked before; this time there were men in the yard behind and the roofs of the adjacent buildings. Of the twenty-four men that were in the building not one escaped. And seven of them did not wish to escape. Those seven were Tom Horton and the other multimillionaire collectors, who had suddenly decided to simplify life by getting rid of the treasures which they had spent their lifetime in collecting.

"I said you could write your own check, and I meant it," said Mr. Robert Bleakie. He wrote his name in the right-hand corner of a check, and pushed the paper over to Peham.

"And I said that your words were sweetly sympathetic. I find your actions equally so. I have already collected ten thousand apiece from six victims. Ten thousand more will just about make it right," said Peham.

Mr. Bleakie lit a cigar. "And if you care to tell me just how you do it all out, you may make it eleven thousand," he remarked.

"I'll do it for nothing," smiled Peham.

"There was a coincidence in seven men deciding to sacrifice fabulously valuable collections at the same time," he began, "but the coincidence did not seem important to me until another coincidence was brought to my attention. That was the strange disappearance of seven character actors.

And still I did not put the two things together. I did so only when a man whom I believed responsible for the disappearance of the seven actors paid a visit to the house of your partner, Tom Horton. Then I began to have a glimmering of the scheme.

"The glimmering became the dazzling rays of sunshine when I learned that this man—his ostensible name was Ferry—had paid other visits to the homes of six wealthy men, two of whom I already knew to be collectors who were disposing of their properties. You told me that the others were doing the same thing. Of course, what I considered sunshine might have been moonshine, but—it wasn't. Ferry was the commander visiting his troops."

"I found, within the house, that Ferry had visited all of the rich collectors. The actors had been kidnapped because they could impersonate multimillionaires. The multimillionaires had been kidnapped in order to make way for the actors who would impersonate them and sell their property."

"But who could have engineered such a thing?" cried Bleakie.

"Ferry blazened, admits that the Gray Ghost is his employer. So do the other men. And, as usual, they don't know where he is, and if they did they wouldn't tell."

"But how could he know that the actors would consent to turn criminals?" asked Bleakie.

"Fear works wonders," answered Peham, dryly. "The Gray Ghost had planned his scheme with great care and valets in the households of his victims. He spends a year in planning, if need be. The actors knew that if they disobeyed they would be killed. Seven tried to betray his captors. He was killed. So was Swinburn. It was pretended that the men whom they impersonated were

sick in bed, and the sales at their houses stopped. But the other five actors, learning of what had happened to Septien and Swinburn—the latter was drugged, then pushed in front of a train—were so frightened that they offered no further resistance."

"What will be done to the actors?" asked Bleakie.

"Nothing," said Peham. "I have the promise of all concerned as regards them. If the multimillionaires submitted, to save their lives, to the indignity of being kidnapped, why should they wish to punish men who yielded to similar terrors?"

"I think, young man, that you are a remarkable detective."

"Thank you," replied Peham, bitterly. "If I were half as good a detective as the Gray Ghost is, I am a crook, I'd be the greatest man in my line that ever lived."

REACTION had come, and he was still in the depths of despair when he reached his apartment. He had served millions by his quick understanding of the situation. But all his self-pride was half vicious. He could prevent the Gray Ghost from reaping his full profit, but that was all. The great criminal always gained something. And never could Peham lay his hand upon his great prize.

If once again I could meet him, face to face," he said to himself.

As though in answer to his whispered speech the telephone rang. He answered it and thrilled as he recognized the voice of Jerry Tryon.

"Mr. Peham, you have interfered for the last time. Within the next week I am going to kill you with my own hands."

That was all. Peham would meet his great opponent face to face.

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How World Has Gained By Fortunate Accidents

It is necessary or accident the mother of invention. The old adage would lead us to believe that it was necessity, but accident has indeed played a large part in many of the inventions which have added to our industrial wealth and to the pleasures and conveniences which make life more comfortable and able. Not infrequently an invention has been suggested by some trivial event which would have passed unnoticed had not a man with eyes and brains seen it.

It was an accident that gave us the telephone. Dr. Alexander G. Bell, a Scotchman, was working on a revolution and thereby gave us one of the marvels of our age, but he had no idea at the time what it meant.

Dr. Bell was by inheritance and training a scientist and was at the time seeking some method of making speech visible by means of light flashes. He was working with a camera when another man had invented with the idea of carrying speech to a distance by means of an electric current and a wire. The current used was intermittent—that is, jumped a space and was therefore not continuous. When Dr. Bell turned the screw he closed the gap and made the current constant, which is the principle of the telephone.

He did not realize the value of what he had done until he was demonstrating to some friends that he could talk from the garret to the cellar. The next morning in order to protect his discovery he went to the patent office and procured a patent on his invention. At 3 o'clock the same day another man appeared and sought a patent for an invention with the same idea. The difference of a few hours lost him a hundred million dollars.

It was accident that put George Westinghouse on the track of his chief invention. While on a railway journey he was importuned by a poor woman to buy a magazine. He read in an article describing a compressed air borer used in a mountain tunnel, which gave him a clue to his automatic air brake.

Senefelder, the inventor of lithography, was a jack of all trades and an engraver and printer. He was working at etching on copper when the coppersmith refused to let him have any more plates unless he paid cash for them, and it was then that he tried to utilize the old plates by rubbing off the etchings with a soft limestone. After the copper became useless through many rubbings he tried etching on the stone. One day he was polishing off a stone which he intended to etch when his mother asked him to write the laundry list, as the laundress was waiting. Not finding a bit of paper or ink at hand, he wrote the list on the stone with printing ink prepared from wax, soap and lampblack, intending to copy it at leisure.

A few days later, when he was about to wipe the ink from the stone, he wondered what the effect would be of writing with the prepared ink on the stone, if it should be bitten in with aquafortis. He bit away to about the hundredth part of an inch, took several impressions of the writing and the art of lithography was discovered.

One day the children of a Dutch spectacle maker had some of the spectacles in front of his door, playing with them, put two of the largest and glasses together and peeped through them. To their surprise, the weathercock on the church across the way was brought close to their eyes. Showing the strange sight to their father, he set to work and constructed a curious toy. Galileo, hearing of this, toy which made distant things appear close at hand, say at once what a valuable aid it would be in studying the heavens and set to work and soon made the telescope.

Daguerre was careless enough to lay a silver spoon upon a plate that

he had treated with iodine. He noticed that the image of the spoon was retained and thus by accident learned that a plate so treated was sensitive to light. He laid one of his silver plates which had been exposed to a camera image in a cupboard with various chemicals overnight and found in the morning a perfect image developed, thus discovering the effect of vapor of mercury on a sensitive plate.

A railway pointsman, who had to stand at a signal station some distance apart, decided to save himself the trouble of walking to and fro between them, so he fastened the two levers together with a long piece of wire. A broken iron chair served as a counterweight, and the wire ran on into his hut, where he sat at night and worked the two signals without setting his foot outside. When the railway officials found it out they reprimanded him, but at the same time rewarded him for his ingenuity and adopted his invention.

Both towels were accidentally discovered by a taxi manufacturer whose machinery got out of order and tangled the threads intended for a smooth product. After readjusting his machine, the man picked up the spoiled material, wiped his hands on it and found it more effective than the smooth one, so he patented it and made a machine which would tangle the threads.

It was through the casual use of waste that we have blotting paper. Careless workmen in a paper mill omitted the size from some pulp and the result was a parcel of paper that would not absorb ink. Some one picked it up to write a note on it and discovered its absorbent qualities and straightway blotting paper was invented.

The use of stiff collars is due to the mental alertness of a blacksmith named Troy, N. Y., who, somewhere about the year 1825, was washing her husband's shirts, which, according to custom, had the collars fastened to them. It occurred to her that the shirt stayed clean longer than the collar and she made some separate collars. Her neighbors soon followed her example, and she sold them some. Before many years several collar-making companies were doing a good business.

Violin Vibrations.

"What force least expected does the greatest damage to buildings." The answer made by an architect may be a surprise to those who do not understand that it is the regularity of vibration that renders it powerful.

There have been instances where the walls of stone and of brick structures have been seriously affected by the vibrations from a violin. Of course, these cases are unusual, but the facts are established.

The vibrations of a violin are really serious in their unbroken, unbounded, regularity, and when they come with regularity they exercise an influence upon structures of brick, stone or iron. Of course, it takes continuous playing for many years to loosen masonry or to make iron brittle, but it will do it in time.

The architect mentioned says that he has often wondered what the result would be if a man would stand at the bottom of a nineteen-story light-well on the first floor of the great Masonic Temple in Chicago and play there continuously. The result could be more easily seen there than almost anywhere else, because the vibrations gather force as it sweeps upward.

One can feel the vibrations of a violin on an iron-clad ocean vessel, and at the same time be unable to hear the music. It is the regularity that means so much. Like the constant dripping of water, which wears away a stone, the incessant vibrations of the violin makes its way to the walls and attacks their solidity.



THEY FOUND SEPTEN IN CENTRAL PARK, A BULLET HOLE IN HIS FOREHEAD AND A REVOLVER BESIDE HIM.